

Local train stations may add to rail effort

PHIL HELSEL, Morning Journal Writer

November 26, 2004

ELYRIA -- A state commission pushing a \$3.3 billion overhaul of Ohio's passenger rail system says that efforts in Elyria and other communities to repair once-grand train stations are vital to the effort.

The Ohio Rail Development Commission announced last week an ambitious \$3.3 billion "Ohio and Lake Erie Regional Rail Hub" plan to transform the state's railways and promote passenger train service. If it comes to fruition, the plan would bring back something that most rail passengers can scarcely remember: Rail service during the daytime.

Advertisement

"We're a flyover state, pretty much, for the airlines and passenger rail," said commission spokesman Stu Nicholson. "The trains have got to be somewhere in the middle of the night, and if you're traveling from New York to Chicago, Ohio is the halfway point."

The commission wants to use local and state dollars that are already being used for Ohio Department of Transportation rail grade-separation projects and use it to leverage for federal dollars, but right now the federal government doesn't fund passenger rail systems, Nicholson said.

Under ideal conditions, the system envisioned by the Ohio Rail Development Commission wouldn't be up and running for at least nine years, he said.

In the meantime, the efforts of Elyria as well as several other communities to rehabilitate aging New York Central Depot train stations could go a long way toward making passenger rail a viable option for travelers, Nicholson said.

"The recognition is there that if you want to have rail service, you've got to have a place for the trains to stop," Nicholson said. "That has to come from the communities."

Lorain County is still a long way from turning the 79-year-old New York Central Depot Train Station on East Avenue in Elyria into a transportation center that will house Lorain County Transit and maybe rail service, said County Administrator Jim Cordes.

U.S. Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Lorain, announced on Monday that \$1 million in Federal Transportation Administration funds have been earmarked for the project, and Sen. Mike DeWine secured another \$1 million in FTA funds for the transportation center last year.

Rehabilitating and restoring the train depot and rail platforms will cost a total of \$7.5 million, and so far the county has about \$2.5 million for the project, Cordes said.

The Lorain County commissioners are expected to award an architecture and design contract to rehabilitate the building's interior on Dec. 2, but it could be years before the project is complete, Cordes said.

"This could be good for us as we try and get funding to do this project," Cordes said of the railroad commission's plan. "When high-speed rail does come through here, we'll be uniquely positioned with a sophisticated station."

Galion purchased its historic "Big Four" train depot in 2000, and plans are under way to rehabilitate historic train stations in Toledo and Lima, Nicholson said.

Right now, rail passengers in Elyria must use the Amtrak station on East River Road, which resembles a trailer and has an open-air waiting area.

The two train routes that run through Elyria each day have early-morning hours.

The Lake Shore Limited, running from Chicago to New York, comes through Elyria at 2:30 a.m. and 3:27 a.m., and the Capitol Express, which runs from Chicago to Washington, D.C., rolls through Elyria at 12:33 a.m. and 4:51 a.m., according to Amtrak's schedule.